



Questions of Travel

Elizabeth Bishop

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The publication of this book is a literary event. It is Miss Bishop's first volume of verse since *Poems*, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1955. This new collection consists of two parts. Under the general heading "Brazil" are grouped eleven poems including "Manuelzinho," "The Armadillo," "Twelfth Morning, or What You Will," "The Riverman," "Brazil, January 1, 1502" and the title poem. The second section, entitled "Elsewhere," includes others "First Death in Nova Scotia," "Manners," "Sandpiper," "From Trollope's Journal," and "Visits to St. Elizabeths." In addition to the poems there is an extraordinary story of a Nova Scotia childhood, "In the Village." Robert Lowell has recently written, "I am sure no living poet is as curious and observant as Miss Bishop. What cuts so deep is that each poem is inspired by her own tone, a tone of large, grave tenderness and sorrowing amusement. She is too sure of herself for empty mastery and breezy plagiarism, too interested for confession and musical monotony, too powerful for mismanaged fire, and too civilized for idiosyncratic incoherence. She has a humorous, commanding genius for picking up the unnoticed, now making something sprightly and right, and now a great monument. Once her poems, each shining, were too few. Now they are many. When we read her, we enter the classical serenity of a new country."

Questions of Travel Details

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From Reader Review Questions of Travel for online ebook

Rachel Hirstwood says

:D I LOVE these poems. Will return time and again to this collection I think.

Sarah says

Sestina is my favorite poem of this selection, but all the rest were a pleasure to read. Bishop's writing is at times serious, sometimes playful but always intelligent and beautiful. I'm a fan.

Jenna says

I'm currently working my way through Elizabeth Bishop's oeuvre. Her habitual dispassionateness still leaves me cold at times (I realize that many critics consider this quality to be one of Bishop's crown virtues); still, over time, I've developed appreciation for her intelligence and her uncompromising embrace of complexity. I've heard more than one of my acquaintances rave with what I feel is inordinate enthusiasm about the greatness of the Bishop poem entitled "Sestina," but I think the received form in which Bishop does her best work in this collection is the ballad form: in "The Burglar of Babylon," she makes writing a traditional-style ballad seem easy, which it most definitely is not.

?? ? says

"It is lack of imagination that makes us come to imagined places, not just stay at home?"

Greg says

UPDATE: The more I read of Yeats, Merrill, and Ginsberg, the less I think of other poets. And right now, my second reading of Homer's Illiad is just blowing me away. Originally, I had rated this a four star read, but I can't even recall reading it, so I've taken away a star.

ORIGINAL REVIEW

I enjoyed this more than two previous collections by Bishop . I particularly liked the end of a poem entitled "Questions of Travel":

"Continent, city, country, society:
the choice is never wide and never free.
And here, or there...No. Should we have stayed at home,
wherever that may be?"

I think we've all questioned ourselves about the definition of home. And another poem, "First Death in Nova Scotia" is haunting and beautiful. Bishop observes, in "Filling Station", a dilapidated shack behind the pumps. She questions the placement of an extraneous begonia and an embroidered doily on worn wickerwork. But "somebody embroidered the doily" and "somebody waters the plant" so Bishop concludes that "Somebody loves us all".

Michael Arnold says

This was seriously fantastic!

Thomas says

Poetry can be explicably pleasing sometimes. Especially for the amateur poetry reader, it's hard to explain why a collection or a particular poem works. Questions of Travel is pure pleasure. There is nothing over-clever or obviously inventive or new about Bishop's poems. They contain an element of narrative, of diary-like confession, of fly-on-the-wall observation that reads like storytelling in the true sense. In a short space and few words, Bishop evokes a scene, a place, and fills it with colour and emotion. Essentially that is what makes travel beautiful.

The collection is split into two. The first half are entitled 'Brazil' and are travel tales beginning with 'Arrival at Santos' and diverging into less personal poems as she delves deeper into her destination and discovers its sight, sounds and stories. The opening trio are magical, capturing that sense of arriving somewhere new, of being displaced but fascinated by a new country, and the third 'Questions of Travel' is the best of the lot. She concentrates on the little details that inform our memories, especially when travelling, on a tiny green hummingbird, a broken gasoline pump or a sunset. But it is full of dreams and questions too, one in particular - "Is it the lack of imagination that makes us come to imagined places?" "Should we have stayed at home, whenever that may be?"

A lot of the poems that follow are narrative in a sense, stories watched by the outsider, the traveller. 'Manuelzinho', 'The Burglar of Babylon' and 'The Riverman' have an air of folk tale mixed with social commentary. Others like 'Electrical Storm' and 'Song for the Rainy Season' paint pictures of travelling scenes. All of them are great. The second half, called 'Elsewhere', looks back at those questions of home and seems to make the point that everywhere, at home or on the road, can paint a picture for us. While the longer, prose poem 'In the Village' is somewhat disappointing the rest are almost as good as the first half. 'Sandpiper' and 'Filling Station' are particularly evocative. The final poem, 'Visits to St. Elisabeths' shows a more playful side to Bishop's poetry - a strictly structured poem that reads like a nursery rhyme with its song-like repetitions. From start to finish a brilliant collection. 8

Rebecca says

I came across a reference to "Sandpiper" in Silas House's *Southernmost*, so started there and then proceeded through the rest of the collection in a random order. Over half of the poems are set in Brazil, and the rest "Elsewhere." I liked particular lines or images but the whole doesn't particularly hang together, and sometimes the repetition is too much, as in "Sestina" or "Visits to St. Elizabeths." [Read from the *Complete*

Poems.]

Favorite lines:

“Like a first coat of whitewash when it’s wet, / the thin gray mist lets everything show through” (from “Twelfth Morning; or What You Will”)

“Somebody embroidered the doily. / Somebody waters the plant, / … Somebody loves us all.” (from “Filling Station”)

Madeline says

What I have liked about Bishop's poetry - which is even true of "One Art" - is that it is so unsentimental. Where other writers would take a theme or event and make it wet and heavy and mawkish, Bishop approaches it coolly - there's something nearly cruel and vicious about the way she deals with tragedy and sadness, something suggesting bared teeth.

Mostly, though, that doesn't apply to *Questions of Travel*, which contains an unexpected short story on top of the poetry. I probably liked the title poem best, for its engagement with the main theme of the collection and exemplifying the cool and thoughtful voice for which Bishop is so well-praised. And also for marrying the abstract with the practical, something I always appreciate in verse.

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Chris says

This one contained the first poem of Bishop's that I ever read, "Sestina." I think many others are in that boat.

And while I love that poem, and many others in this collection, this was a bit off for some reason. Her language and imagery are nothing short of gorgeous, but some of the extended poems felt like they became too much, stretched on for too long.

Still, given my very basic interest in poetry, Bishop is at the top of my list for favorites.

Manik Sukoco says

A really nice collection of poems about travel that is so unsentimental. Where other writers would take a theme or event and make it wet and heavy, Bishop approaches it coolly - there's something nearly cruel and vicious about the way she deals with tragedy and sadness. I love most of these poems. This book was seriously fantastic!

Christopher says

Elizabeth Bishop's first two collections were written during the poet's early life ranging up and down the Eastern Seaboard, the observational poems within are inspired by experiences in Nova Scotia, New England or Florida. Her third collection *Questions of Travel* is very different indeed, for in late 1951 at the age of 40, Bishop set off for Brazil (where she would remain for 15 years) after beginning a relationship with the architect Lota de Macedo Soares. Suddenly Bishop's careful eye came to focus with ethnographical curiosity on South America.

Indeed, the very first poem in the collection recounts the arrival of Bishop's steamer in the Brazil port city of Santos:

Here is a coast, here is a harbor
here, after a meager diet of horizon is some scenery:
impractically shaped and -- who knows? -- self-pitying mountains
sad and harsh beneath their frivolous greenery. ... Oh, tourist
is this how this country is going to answer you / and your immodest demands for a different
world, / and for a better life?

Once Bishop landed, local colour took over her poetry. There are two poems on squatters settling around Rio de Janeiro, a long ballad on a notorious criminal that escaped prison and was shot by police in his home shantytown he fled to for refuge, and mentions of indigenous Amazonian practices.

Not all of the book is set in Brazil, however. The second half of the book is titled "Elsewhere" and consists of poems and recollections from the United States. Probably the most famous poem in the book, and in Bishop's entire career, is "Visits to St. Elizabeth", written when Bishop was Poet Laureate at the Library of Congress and often went to see Ezra Pound, then locked up in an insane asylum. Bishop casts the poem in the form of the children's rhyme "This is the house that Jack built":

This is the house of Bedlam. This is the man that lies in the house of Bedlam. This is the time of the tragic man that lies in the house of Bedlam. This is a wristwatch telling the time of the talkative man that lies in the house of Bedlam. This is a sailor wearing the watch that tells the time of the honored man that lies in the house of Bedlam. ... This is a Jew in a newspaper hat that dances carefully down the ward, walking the plank of a coffin board with the crazy sailor that shows his watch that tells the time of the wretched man that lies in the house of Bedlam.

But the material in "Elsewhere" is mainly concerned with Bishop's childhood, which was a sad one as her father died early and her mother went mad and had to be institutionalized, leaving Bishop to be brought up

by her parents in Nova Scotia. The prose piece “In the Village”, the only one in this book and the first to ever appear in a Bishop collection, is an episode from that Nova Scotia childhood (with the madness of her mother lurking always in the background) and captures remarkably well the wonder children feel when the world around them is so big and foreign. “In a Filling Station”, “First Death in Nova Scotia” and “Sestina” also look back to a childhood before 1920 or so.

I must admit, I was disappointed by this third collection by Bishop after loving *A Cold Spring* and *North and South*. Bishop gets so caught up in South American exotica that the poems lack the more universal meanings. Plus, the Brazil poems are long-winded and don't have the concision of earlier Bishop. I've started wondering if drink (Bishop had a lifelong struggle with alcoholism) was starting to have a detrimental effect on her poetry. In any event, the best introduction to Bishop is the Library of America volume (ISBN 1598530178) of poems, prose and letters, and if you get that, you'll have *Questions of Travel* too.

Castles says

I've found the first half of the book (the poems) a bit arrogant, and the second half charming with its childhood story.

The only reason I came to this book is from the wonderful biography of Clarice Lispector, where it's described how Mrs. Bishop really liked her writings and encouraged her works to be translated into English. Later though she diminished her enthusiasm and found Lispector too local and simple. While it's no competition, After reading this book there is no doubt in my mind that Lispector is unbelievably better than what she thought, touched by genius and magic, her writings touch timelessness, while bishop's poetry is slouching in a colonial arrogance of a white lady among the Brazilians locals and a perspective which in this age is no longer easy to digest.

Justin says

Another stunning collection from Bishop. Although not as consistently superb as *North and South*, *Questions of Travel* includes some interesting development and departures. Many of the included poems are as good as anything Bishop has done, which more than makes up for the occasional miss. (Why did we feel it necessary to write "Casey at the Bat" for favella life? Looking at you, Burglar of Babylon.)

Favorites include Sestina, Sandpiper, Electrical Storm, Questions of Travel, Filling Station, and Brazil, January 1, 1502.
